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Ideas of Freedom

A Historic-Philosophical Journey through an Ambivalent Experience

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT 

The question of freedom together with its complex and dialectical manifestations seems to be at the same time unavoidable and impossible and has opened up different interpretative theories throughout the history of philosophical thought. One ideal-typical reading, which by now has become classic, schematically distinguishes two main concepts of the ambivalent experience of freedom, namely positive and negative liberty, which characterized respectively the ancient and the modern individual and collective way of life. While the former emphasizes the universal dimension of the community the individual belongs to, the latter understands freedom as the absence of impositions and as emancipation from the oppressive power of any internal or external despotism. This contribution aims to historically contextualize these two positions, showing their ambivalences and exceptions, in order to problematize the contemporary “immunitarian” comprehension of freedom invoking ancient practices, in order to rethink freedom as a necessary political construction in the public sphere.

DEUTSCH

Die Frage nach der Freiheit drängt sich als eine unvermeidbare Frage auf, die gleichzeitig aber – angesichts ihrer komplexen und dialektischen Manifestationen – als unmöglich zu beantworten erscheint. Die Frage hat in der Geschichte des philosophischen Denkens verschiedene interpretative Zugänge erfahren. Eine idealtypische, nahezu klassisch gewordene Lesart unterscheidet schematisch zwei grundlegende Konzepte, nach denen die ambivalente Erfahrung der Freiheit unterteilt werden kann: in positive und negative Freiheit. Mit Hilfe dieser beiden Figuren wird versucht, vorausgegangene und moder-

ne Lebensweisen zu betrachten, und dies sowohl auf individueller als auch auf gemeinschaftlich-kollektiver Ebene. Während das Konzept der positiven Freiheit vor allem die universelle Dimension der Gemeinschaft betont, welcher das Individuum angehört, ist im negativen Zugang Freiheit vor allem die Absenz von Unterwerfungen: Eine befreiende Struktur zeigt sich in der Emanzipation von unterdrückenden despotischen Mächten sowohl interner als auch externer Natur. Der Beitrag zielt darauf ab, diese beiden Positionen geschichtlich einzuordnen und deren Ambivalenzen und Ausnahmen zu verdeutlichen, um die gegenwärtige Ausfaltung eines Freiheitsdenkens, das auf eine Immunisierung (vor dem Anderen) abzielt, kritisch anzufragen. Unter Rückbezug auf antike Zugänge zur Konzeption von Freiheit wird die Notwendigkeit verdeutlicht, diese als ein grundlegend politisches Konstrukt in der öffentlichen Sphäre zu verankern.

| BIOGRAPHY

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In the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* (§ 482) Hegel writes: “No idea is so generally recognised as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions (to which therefore it actually falls a victim) as the idea of Liberty: none in common currency with so little appreciation of its meaning” (Hegel 2012, 101).¹

“No idea is so generally recognised as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions as the idea of Liberty.”

The following remarks have as their point of departure the awareness of the unavoidability and impossibility of the question of freedom, cautiously crisscrossing different interpretative theories. The ideal-typical character of these readings, which by now has become classic, seems to grant the question of freedom a schematic intelligibility, without nevertheless disregarding the elements of indeterminacy, ambivalence, and polysemy marking this experience as well as its complex and dialectical manifestations throughout history. The last part of this contribution considers a contemporary philosophical-political paradigm, which problematizes the present ambivalent experience of freedom invoking ancient practices, in order to rethink freedom as a necessary political construction in the public sphere.

The Liberty of the Ancients – *Communitas*

The comparison between the two distinct meanings of the notion of liberty finds not so much its seminal theorization as the outcome of a secular debate in the speech entitled “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns” by Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) (Constant 1988). Constant gave this speech at the *Athénée Royal* in Paris after the dramatic events of the French Revolution and in response to the new despotism that resulted from them. Indeed, such a contraposition had been anticipated in the literary field by the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, whose elaboration during the enthusiastic years of the scientific and astronomic Revolution acquired its full thematization with the English and French political philosophy of the 17th and 18th century (from Hobbes and Hume to Rousseau). In the 20th century, the division between the two concepts of liberty is proposed again by Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 2002) within a context where the value of individual freedom can no longer be called into question.

¹ In a similar way, Montesquieu states that: “There is no word that admits of more various significations, and has made more different impressions on the human mind, than that of liberty” (Montesquieu 1977, 209).

“I wish to submit for your attention a few distinctions, still rather new, between two kinds of liberty: these differences have thus far remained unnoticed, or at least insufficiently remarked. The first is the liberty the exercise of which was so dear to the ancient peoples; the second the one the enjoyment of which is especially precious to the modern nations” (Constant 1998, 309).

Constant’s speech is eminently political and must be read, against the background of the political climate of the Second Restoration in France, as a potential explanation of revolutionary terror. Constant defines it as “our happy revolution (I call it happy, despite its excesses, because I concentrate my attention on its results)” (Constant 1998, 309), thereby showing his adherence to the language and principles of the Enlightenment tradition. The first part of the speech is dedicated to the description of the two kinds of liberty and their comparison regarding the element the ancients and the moderns share, i. e. a republican conception of the nature of sovereignty. Constant presents ancient liberty thusly:

“The latter consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgements; in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them. But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community” (Constant 1998, 311).

Constant interprets ancient liberty in light of the synthetic category of “collective sovereignty”, according to which each individual is fully subservient to the universal dimension of the community he belongs to. What is striking here is the image of the individual as a sovereign in the public and political domain and as a slave in the civil and private realm. The liberty the ancient peoples praised so much has nothing to do with civil rights and individual guarantees, but rather it concerns the possibility of being an active and substantial citizen of the *polis*. Hence, liberty amounts to the subjection of individuals to the collective body, which exerts an absolute power over their intimate lives. The absolute sovereignty in the political domain is paralleled by an equally absolute submission at the private level. One cannot deny that the moral and cultural constellation of Athens (especially in the post-Periclean epoch) shows aspects that are different from

the experience of freedom in the Greek world. Max Pohlenz's studies, for instance, demonstrate how the Greeks understood liberty first and foremost as internal freedom of conscience, as a distant premise of modern liberty (Pohlenz 1966; Toynbee 1959). The analysis of de Romilly appears more radical, placing the very same origin of modern liberty in Athens (de Romilly 1989). Actually, Constant himself sees Athens as an exception, though he emphasises that Socrates – the emblematic figure, together with the Sophists, of a vital Enlightenment trend within the monolithic corpus of the Greek tradition – was sentenced to death: being motivated by a rationality aimed at a higher form of justice. In fact, Socrates' will to free his fellow citizens from the symbolic system of the Athenian aristocracy could not be tolerated by the aggregate of *demos* and *ethos* that structured the whole horizon of the ancient world (see Plato 1999, 109–111).

According to the Greek and Roman lexicon, a person can be said to be free if he is not in chains.

A close scrutiny of ancient Greece reveals that the experience of freedom [*eleutheria*] pointed first of all to the image of and desire for a self-determined mode of life following the *patrioi nomoi* or social customs, without the obligation of submitting oneself to the tyranny of an arbitrary power. The notion of liberty has a defensive meaning and defines an anti-despotic principle, the exercise of which is the prerogative of a limited group of individuals: according to the Greek and Roman lexicon, a person can be said to be free if he is not in chains, namely if he is not a slave but rather a male and adult citizen belonging to a community of peers in charge of the government of the city and endowed with certain political powers. Women, children, elderly people, slaves, foreigners could not enjoy these powers and therefore they were not free.²

In any case, liberty in antiquity amounts to the protection of one's own customs, the adherence to one's own tradition, and the obedience to the authority of the social body. It concerns people's self-determination and self-preservation in the choice of their origins and goals as well as in the faithful cultivation of a shared *ethos*. That represents a key element of ancient republicanism, which modernity transposes into the unity between the autonomous rule of law and the collective's sovereignty. For this reason, what we are dealing with here is a *democratic form of liberty* as the possibility of publicly and personally intervening in a direct way into the *res publica* (like in Athens or Sparta during the classical age). Liberty is equiva-

² In the age of the decline of the Greek polis, Aristotle considers the free man as a *zoon politikon* (i. e. as a political animal), who exists thanks to a specific web of interpersonal relations within a general horizon of civil friendship. An exemplary synthesis of the ancient model of liberty and democracy can be found in his *Politics*, where despite his scepticism Aristotle delineates the essential traits of the democratic form of government (Aristotle 1992, 362–363). For Aristotle, there is an integral relationship between democracy, liberty, and equality: like every ancient political thinker, he considers only those men as citizens who are free and were born of free parents, whereas slaves are unfree.

lent to political citizenship, i. e. to the positive freedom of participation in the construction of the common good. Consequently, liberty manifests itself in the struggle against foreign despotism as well as in the forms of civic friendship and juridical cooperation marking the *polis*. In both cases, it is tightly connected with the constitution and protection of human sociality. The fundamental belief of ancient philosophy is that there exists an order, purpose, and justice intrinsic in reality, which human beings are called to respect and realize in theory and praxis. This vision finds its paradigmatic expression in the philosophy of Anaximander, as is testified by the only fragment of his writings that has reached us:

*“Whence things have their origin,
Thence also their destruction happens,
According to necessity;
For they give to each other justice and recompense
For their injustice
In conformity with the ordinance of Time”* (Curd 1996, 12).

The universal principle of the *apeiron* – i. e. what is divine, indefinite and infinite, eternal and imperishable – is the womb of all things, which it generates and reabsorbs “according to necessity” in a cycle of birth and death as well as of struggle between opposing elements. What needs to be underlined is the aspect of “injustice” that, for Anaximander, each entity carries with itself: individuation is unjust with respect to the whole because it gives substance to the singular to the detriment of the totality of the *apeiron*. Justice [*dike*] rules the cosmic movements of men and things, thereby guaranteeing the order at the root of the anthropological and ontological vision of the Greeks. Later, the *polis* becomes the manifestation of this *cosmos*: through the art of politics, man understands its nature as a social animal destined to live with others according to the principle of *isonomia*, which is to say the equality of all men before the law.

**Justice rules the cosmic movements of men and things.
Individuation is unjust with respect to the whole.**

A similar perspective is shared by the Stoic school, according to which reason is a cosmological-ontological principle that finds its expression in human beings as their capacity to follow its rules. Being free means acting in conformity with the principles of reason and, therefore, acting out of

duty: binding all men, what reason dictates must be realized with intention towards human unity and sociality as well as the order of the whole universe. In this sense, liberty is that which cements a group ensuring its self-preservation, since each of its members belongs to it not on the basis of a property principle but rather based on a system of duties and mutual debts (the word *communitas* includes the idea of *munus*³), i. e. a system of bonds and belonging within which the individual emerges against the background of a real sociality. It is not by chance that, precisely during the Hellenistic period, when independent democracies lose weight and value within the vastness of the Macedonian empire, philosophers start elaborating forms of life more responsive to the quest for inner peace and the desire of withdrawing from the turmoil of the external world. Epicureans and Stoics lay the groundwork for the construction of an “inner citadel” (Marcus Aurelius) that could protect from the chaos and abuses of power of the external world, thereby defending an intimate space of subjective autonomy and freedom. If it is true that this philosophical trajectory – what Pierre Hadot defines as an ensemble of authentic spiritual exercises – is the prerogative of an intellectual and well-off élite, it is possible to show an actual correspondence between the “care of the self” and the decline of the ancient democracy, or, for similar reasons, of the Roman republic.

Ancient liberty goes by the name of *positive liberty* as the concrete possibility of autonomously living within the community.

Such an emphasis on a shared *ethos* as the ground for the cultivation and preservation of liberty is the hallmark of the ancients: in this respect, ancient liberty also goes by the name of *positive liberty* (of *freedom to*) as the concrete possibility of autonomously living and planning one’s private and public life within a democratic context. Ancient liberty is “positive” because it makes reference to the possibility of determining one’s own will towards an end beyond any kind of subjection, just as freedom is “negative” when it underlines the absence of constraints or despotic authorities that determine an individual’s action in a heteronomous way. Anyway, liberty in antiquity is liberty *within* the *polis*, *within* the community, and not freedom *from* the *polis* or *from* community, whereby one can speak of “a socialized freedom, a freedom that results from the security of belonging in many places” (Murray 1995, 242). It is this security that undergoes a major transformation in the course of modernity.

³ Roberto Esposito shows that the term *communitas* connects the affective tone of gift [*munus*] with the anonymous burden of duty and honour [*onus*]. Originally, *munus* refers to the gift understood as a duty, as an obligation towards others, whereby it stands for what is not one’s own, what begins where the sphere of one’s possessions ends: “the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or a possession [*appartenenza*]. It isn’t having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift



The Liberty of the Moderns – *Immunitas*

“First ask yourselves, Gentlemen, what an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a citizen of the United States of America understand today by the word ‘liberty’. For each of them it is the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals” (Constant 1988, 310–311).

“No one may be compelled to do what the Law does not ordain.”

The liberty of the moderns – as European culture could understand it between the 18th and 19th century – is *negative liberty*: first and foremost, it concerns the condition under which the subject enjoys the possibility to act without impediments and coercions, namely freedom from any constraint and external determination. This freedom finds a legal recognition in the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (Article 5): “Nothing that is not forbidden by Law may be hindered, and no one may be compelled to do what the Law does not ordain”. Isaiah Berlin defines the “negative” meaning of liberty as that which is

“involved in the answer to the question ‘What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?’ [...] If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree [...]. The wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom” (Berlin 2002, 169–170).

According to this second meaning, liberty is understood as the absence of impositions and as emancipation from the oppressive power of a sovereign or a government, from a religious despotism – internal or external – and from the forces of nature that lie outside our control. Thanks to negative liberty, the subject can think and act beyond the constraints of censorship and submission, thereby conquering a private sphere of self-determination (freedom of opinion, of the press, of assembly, of religion, of association, etc.) shielded from the intrusiveness of public power.

Negative liberty lies at the basis of the thinking of many important political philosophers, both English (Locke, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill) and French (Helvetius, Constant, Tocqueville), and it is the expression of what can be called *liberal freedom*, namely of that political perspective aimed at guaran-

that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack” (Esposito 2010, 6). Within the community, therefore, individuals are deprived of what is most proper to them, i. e. their subjectivity: they are subject insofar as they are subjected to a debt, an expropriation. Only under this condition of “alteration” can the subject join and live within the community.

teeing the rights of man and a private sphere protected from state power. Such margin of negotiation between the individual and the state changes according to each thinker, in relation to the more or less positive picture they attribute to public power and the human being – their substantial (un)sociability, their egoistic tendencies, their tolerance of frustrations, their desire for security, their fear of death. In any case, all liberal thinkers endorse the principle of the protection of a minimal space of individual freedom, with the intent to prevent the degradation or violation of human nature as such. Hence, this space of non-interference constitutes the object of a complex and open debate, which delineates the different positions within the tradition of modern political liberalism.

The radical transformation of the very idea and practice of liberty in the modern world, Constant clarifies, undoubtedly has historical explanations that concern the different extension of social bodies, the general improvement of customs and the desire for a peaceful life facilitated by the development of commerce, which in the modern epoch becomes “the normal state of things, the only aim, the universal tendency, the true life of nations” (Constant 1988, 314), progressively replacing the art of war as the means of interaction with and conquest of other territories. The relative internal stability of the states, together with the progressive abolition of slavery, allows an ever-increasing number of persons to dedicate their lives to work and commercial activities, developing their intellectual capacities, their creativity and entrepreneurial potentiality. These radical changes in the existing mentality, customs, and institutions have deeply altered the conception of liberty and the vision of modern man’s life, so that the ancient ideal appears as irrevocably overcome, though not without a sense of remorse for something great that has been lost:

“It follows from what I have just indicated that we can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence. The share which in antiquity everyone held in national sovereignty was by no means an abstract presumption as it is in our own day. The will of each individual had real influence: the exercise of this will was a vivid and repeated pleasure. Consequently the ancients were ready to make many a sacrifice to preserve their political rights and their share in the administration of the state. Everybody, feeling with pride all that his suffrage was worth, found in this awareness of his personal importance a great compensation. This compensation no longer exists for us today. Lost in the multitude, the individual can almost

never perceive the influence he exercises. Never does his will impress itself upon the wall; nothing confirms in his eyes his own cooperation. The exercise of political rights, therefore, offers us but a part of the pleasures that the ancients found in it, while at the same time the progress of civilization, the commercial tendency of the age, the communication amongst peoples, have infinitely multiplied and varied the means of personal happiness. It follows that we must be far more attached than the ancients to our individual independence. For the ancients when they sacrificed that independence to their political rights, sacrificed less to obtain more, while in making the same sacrifice, we would give more to obtain less” (Constant 1988, 316–317).

Negative freedom as a replacement of the lost *politeia*

The growth of the private individual’s importance is directly proportional to the decline of his political relevance and of the “vivid and repeated pleasure” resulting from the collective recognition that came with it. Lost amidst the anonymous body of the multitude and in the “commercial tendency of the age”, the modern subject finds a new secure ground in the search for self and the attachment to his own individual independence. As a replacement of the lost *politeia*, the modern individual asserts its negative liberty, which is understood as the search for one’s personal security relieved from any common obligation.

“The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among the citizens of the same fatherland: this is what they called liberty. The aim of the moderns is the enjoyment of security in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures” (Constant 1988, 317).

In this passage, Constant offers us a clear and effective definition of modern liberty: the latter denotes the peaceful enjoyment of private autonomy. Freedom undergoes a process of individualization and immunization from the collective body. Employing the interpretative apparatus of the political philosopher Roberto Esposito, one could say that the community is no longer *communitas* but *immunitas*, or, more precisely, the community comes to correspond to the paradox of a *communitas* grounded in an *immunitas*, i. e. to a self-contradictory and self-suppressing movement (see Esposito 2011). Being opposed to one another, immunity drains the common of all its potentialities, wearing out its connective tissue to the point of undermining its supporting structure.

In his post-revolutionary discourse, Constant presents the paradigm of modern liberty as the dissolution of the political and social body, as the process of emancipation of the individual from the socio-political whole. Based on the immunitarian apparatus, this modern-contemporary vision does not presuppose any communitarian foundation, but rather aims to make it inoperative. The social bond loses not only its naturalness but also its foundational and positive character. As a result, what starts to take shape is a reflection on the necessity of a private contract that could productively stabilize and regulate relations between individuals, thereby generating the social bond. The contractualistic conception of sociality is no longer grounded in obligations, debts, and gifts, but rather in mutual usefulness and reciprocal benefit (Hobbes 1999, Chapter 15).

What starts to take shape is a reflection on the necessity of a private contract generating the social bond.

“Modern individuals truly become that, the perfectly individual, the ‘absolute’ individual, bordered in such a way that they are isolated and protected, but only if they are freed in advance from the ‘debt’ that binds them one to the other; if they are released from, exonerated, or relieved of that contact, which threatens their identity, exposing them to possible conflict with their neighbour, exposing them to the contagion of the relation with others” (Esposito 2010, 13).

As Thomas Hobbes aptly shows, this contractual and immunitarian paradigm concerns firstly a “protective response in the face of a risk” (Esposito 2001, 1), i. e. in the face of the contaminating danger represented by the proximity to the other.

In light of a pessimistic vision of existence – which he portrays as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1998, 84) – Hobbes elaborates one of the most influential political philosophies of modernity as the age marked by the disintegration of the traditional socio-cultural institutions. The individuals’ equal state and their shared will to affirm themselves are the fundamental motives at the root of civil struggles:

⁴ “So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; [62] and the third, for reputation” (Ibid.).

*“From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only), endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another” (Hobbes 1998, 83).*⁴

One's power to live is ceaselessly exercised in a state of permanent struggle against the shadow of one's own mortality and egoistic passions. Following Hobbes' well-known representation of the state of nature, the resulting *bellum omnia contra omnes* can be considered the symbolic and real image of the struggle of the modern subject for the attainment of its own identity and liberty, which are not natural rights, but are rather obtained thanks to a rational law and to a *pactum unionis et subjectionis*. The social antagonism that derives from it corresponds to the desperate attempt of the subjectivity to achieve its individual liberty within a *pactum societatis*, which immediately reveals its limits and the subsequent necessary subjections. Indeed, it is first and foremost the fear of a violent death as the possible result of civil war that induces men not only to form an association, but also to subject themselves to an absolute sovereign, a repressive and coercive force that ensures their survival and social peace. From this perspective, fear becomes the ground of the modern state, which is called upon to defend its citizens and reassure them in the face of it.

From Hobbes' perspective, fear becomes the ground of the modern state, which is called upon to defend its citizens.

The Hobbesian theory reacts to the wars of religion that inflame the core of European modernity by anticipating as the only possible salvation the power of an absolute sovereign, which albeit based on the alienation of all rights can guarantee peace and social order (Leviathan). This absolute sovereign power responds to the dramatic ambivalence of the modern situation marked by the division between the unconditioned desire for the affirmation of individual liberty and the condition of alienation that such a project intrinsically entails. Hobbes is the brilliant and paradoxical figure of both the identitarian and libertarian passion of the independent subject and of its voluntary submission to an absolute sovereignty, which ensures its peaceful existence. That is the reason why Hobbes' (bio)political paradigm represents a sort of double immunisation of individual existence in the name of the fear of death: community is blocked firstly through the affirmation of the individual and then through the necessity of the state. Based on this, Hobbes opens and animates the not yet extinguished modern debate between desire for freedom and desire for security, between liberalism and absolutism, for which his philosophy has become the landmark. Everyone chooses what to sacrifice in the name of that which he considers to be preferable. The ancients sacrificed liberty in the name of the total-

ity; the moderns sacrifice the totality in the name of liberty. The political project of modernity and the beginning of the political liberalism in Europe (Barberis 1999, 48 and 98), therefore, come to be grounded in the ideal of a negative anti-authoritarian and individualistic liberty, emancipated from any communitarian bond.

If political liberty is the great invention of the ancients, individual liberty is the great invention of the moderns, though the latter finds one of its essential guarantees in the former. Everyone has determined one's existence in relation to a great collective cause: revolutionary minds have then drawn consequences replete with decisive effects and counter-effects for the understanding of the saga of modern liberty, which appears not so linear and monolithic as this neat dichotomy might suggest at first glance.

Between *communitas* and *immunitas* and their contradictions

What marks the beginning of modern revolution is the margin between the subject and the world, the distance and diffidence separating the individual from the community. The notion of modern subject has a clearly individualistic trait, which is determined by its entrepreneurial and acquisitive "bourgeois passions". These passions or virtues of the new *homo faber* and *homo laborans* – who will then become *homo consumens* – produce an anthropological modification that necessarily affects the social body. Modern individuals, in fact, demand from the existing institutions a new mode of management of their needs and a rationalization of their instincts, together with a negative strategy capable of assuring and protecting their spaces of liberty and autonomy, limiting to a minimum the interference of the community in the life of the individuals (Locke is paradigmatic in this respect). This results from the collective imaginary of acquisitive individualism, which is oriented to reduce the control by the other to a minimum while, at the same time, expanding the affirmation of the self and its control over things to a maximum, with a view to a better productivity.

The survival and endurance of a civilisation based upon the political integration of giant macrocosms of individualistic existences seem to be astonishing.

In this respect it can be observed that the survival and endurance of a civilisation based upon the political integration of giant macrocosms of individualistic existences seem to be astonishing. Amongst the most signifi-

cant authors of modernity, the one that aptly understood the substantial incompatibility between the affirmation of the individual and the production of the common is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had the capacity to mesmerize and radicalize the ambivalent tendencies of his epoch. Rousseau can be considered the modern revolutionary figure capable of theorizing the return to the ancient collective sovereignty, thereby manifesting all his anachronistic “prodigious talent” (Constant 1988, 317–320). Rousseau, therefore, represents both in his life and thought an exemplary expression of the complexity and ambivalence of modern liberty.

Indeed, Rousseau starts from the presupposition that the state of nature is not the natural right of each over everything, nor the peaceful situation of a spontaneous co-existence, but rather a condition of supratemporal and pre-social innocence, of which each history and society constitutes the deformation or destruction. The dismissal of the fascination for the collective origin is induced by the emergence of another kind of liberty, in which the individuals affirm themselves according to a different vision of justice and morality that undermines the faith in the traditional moral edifices in order to make room for new and specific convictions. Such space corresponds to the appearance of an unprecedented concept of existence and conscience, according to which the individual conceives of itself in terms of liberty. “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau 1999, 45): an immediate and crystal-clear affirmation, which marks the beginning of a new anthropological epoch, as well as a new mode of doing politics and constructing the social.

“Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

At the same time, in light of his pessimistic conception of human sociality, Rousseau’s audacious political project proclaims the necessity of a republic grounded in the unity of convictions and life visions, which materializes in the notion of “general will”. What is at stake here is the aporetic and radical possibility of a positive community paradoxically premised upon an *a priori* asociality, which is to say of an ideal community based on an *a priori* non-community.

It is not by chance that the author of *The Social Contract*, a text that the French Jacobins carried in their pockets during the days of the Revolution, tremendously suffered the burden of the human community, taking shelter during the last years of his life in an almost isolated place. In this respect, the description of his interiority he portrays in his *Reveries of the Solitary*

Walker (1776–77) – a text written during his stay on the island of Saint-Pierre situated in Lake Bienna – is emblematic:

“In what consists the enjoyment of a like situation? In nothing external, nothing but one’s self, and our own existence; as long as this state lasts, we are sufficient to ourselves, like God. The sense of existence, stripped of every other affection, is of itself a precious sense of contentment and peace, which alone would suffice to render this existence lovely and sweet, to him who knows to remove from his mind all those terrestrial and sensual impressions which incessantly arise to distract and trouble our comfort here below” (Rousseau 1944, 221).

What is at stake is the birth of modern man through a process of subtraction, immunization, abstraction, and depuration.

What is at stake here is the birth of modern man through a process of subtraction, immunization, abstraction, and depuration – like the process of the deconstruction of reality we find in Descartes’ *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. In the middle of an island or in a *tour de librerie* of a castle in Périgord (Montaigne), the solitary subjectivity withdrawn from the common spheres becomes the irradiation centre of subjectivist particles in the surrounding environment, which are easily incorporated by other individuals. What gets slowly produced is a macrocosm of tendentially self-referential subjects, who exercise a new potential of freedom as self-determination, emancipation, and even estrangement with respect to the gravity of the *status quo*.

During the 19th and 20th century, then, one witnesses what Bobbio defines as the “Copernican Revolution” of “the passage from the code of duties to the code of rights” (Bobbio 1997, 54). This anthropological, political, and juridical turn, however, not only affirms the individual liberties of the modern and postmodern subject within a process of emancipation from the traditional authorities and submissions (according to a substantially Kantian line), but it also reinforces the role of state power necessary for institutionalizing and regulating rights themselves, without nonetheless being able to encourage individuals’ trust in the social bond. Commenting on Rousseau’s perspective, Esposito writes:

“Rousseau’s work constitutes the first demand of the community as our own truth, notwithstanding the contradiction that subtracts community from itself. As impossible as it is, the community is necessary. It is our

munus in the exact sense that we deeply carry responsibility for community” (Esposito 2010, 49).

This means that community itself becomes the utopian image of a (quasi-) solitary *reverie* or a (quasi-)miraculous reality, because it is the mere effect of a corpuscular mass of individualist subjects.

“I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly.”

Already within the liberal tradition, many authors have brought to light the potential drifts of the excessive polarization between democratic and liberal freedom, communitarianism and individualism, the discourse of duties and the discourse of rights. In his essay *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville analyses the complex dynamics of democratic industrial societies and their administrative mechanisms, going so far as to speak about a “tyranny of the majority”:

“I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them” (Tocqueville 2010, 1249–1250).

An excess of liberalism and egalitarianism reduces human community within the narrow limits of the domestic sphere which “gladly abandons the great society to itself”, though in the end it becomes more subservient to the conformism of the “general opinion”.

To the eyes of the critics of the second half of the 19th century, modernization and conformism appear as deeply intertwined phenomena. In his essay *On Liberty*, the champion of modern liberty, John Stuart Mill, shows all its preoccupation with regard to the levelling tendencies of a form of egalitarianism that cripples every expression of individuality, thereby resulting in an authentic “despotism of custom”:

“The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to

circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement. The spirit of improvement is not always a spirit of liberty, for it may aim at forcing improvements on an unwilling people; and the spirit of liberty, in so far as it resists such attempts, may ally itself locally and temporarily with the opponents of improvement; but the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals. The progressive principle, however, in either shape, whether as the love of liberty or of improvement, is antagonistic to the sway of Custom, involving at least emancipation from that yoke; and the contest between the two constitutes the chief interest of the history of mankind” (Mill 2003, 134–135).

Democratic equality tends to disintegrate social bonds and leave the individual at the mercy of the despotism of “a formidable and tutelary power”, which manifests itself in the rise of bureaucracies and new intolerances towards differences and discrepancies (Mill 2003, 76). The conformist passion of modern societies does not require the use of force to impose its conditionings and norms upon individual consciences: indeed, it employs “soft” disciplinary practices geared to promote the unconscious internalization of its apparatuses, so that the latter become active while remaining unthought.

The modern man progressively acquires freedom and autonomy, though he finds himself in a condition of deep uncertainty.

Emancipated from the pre-individualistic mechanisms of subjection proper to organic communities, which deprived man of freedom and autonomy while granting him security, the modern man progressively acquires freedom and autonomy, though he finds himself in a condition of deep uncertainty. If the civilization of the Western world corresponds to the actual growth of the liberties and rights of individuals – especially in the sense of a “negative liberty” – what is left unrealized is an effective “positive liberty” capable of materializing the acquired independence. Erich Fromm’s analysis of this shortcoming remains still relevant and profound: “Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless” (Fromm 2001, ix). However, this condition is intolerable, whereby the subject is faced with two alternatives: he can either acknowledge his own condition and *exercise* his freedom – thereby acting according to his will, adhering to his desire –

or he can escape from freedom seeking refuge in other forms of dependence and subjection.

Within the current political and cultural constellation, where the shared symbolic order has been, in fact, deeply enfeebled, the connective tissue of the different liberties has been lacerated: as a consequence, the exercise of individual liberty itself has become extremely problematic. After the conflict between liberalism and Marxism during the decades of the Cold War, the question of freedom re-emerges within a politico-economic context that is radically altered. The expansion of global economy and the transformation of economic power in the phase of advanced capitalism have undermined the traditional symbolic order, the relationships between society and politics, and even the very notions of liberalism and democracy. In sum, the general configuration of contemporary existence.

On the one hand, according to the sociological analyses of Ulrich Beck (Beck 1992; Beck 1999) and Anthony Giddens, the *Risikogesellschaft* configures itself as a society exposed to the new dangers resulting from the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the collateral effects marking technological and industrial progress (so much so that Beck speaks of *non-knowledge society*): on the other, the *Risikogesellschaft* presents itself as the habitat of a *global citizenship*, which is required to assume new responsibilities everyday: within the risk society everything can and must be decided again and again by the single individual. In today's highly individualized society, where the traditional narratives have lost their legitimacy and their force, subjects must develop their own biography in an autonomous way. Far from generating an emancipatory effect, such a situation assumes the features of an unsustainable hazard, whose disruptive result is the loss of a common horizon onto which one could simply shift the burden of responsibility.

The spectre of freedom as the principle of the individuation of subjects

The difference to traditional societies consists in the fact that the subject of late capitalist societies acts under the illusion of being free, namely of being an active subject capable of rational and conscious choices geared towards improving the quality of life. The social rhetoric – i. e. the cunning of capitalist reason – systematically relies on the spectre of freedom as the managerial and productive principle of the individuation of subjects. Indeed, as Foucault claims, neoliberal governmentality is marked by the incessant “production of freedom” corresponding to the economic regime of a specific society:

“The new governmental reason needs freedom therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it. It must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: “be free,” with the immediate contradiction that this imperative may contain. The formula of liberalism is not “be free.” Liberalism formulates simply the following: I am going to produce what you need to be free. I am going to see to it that you are free to be free” (Foucault 2008, 63).

Hence liberty is not a given nor a disposition, but rather something that is organized and fabricated in every instant. The dispositifs of the new governmental reason have brought about an unprecedented anthropological transformation alimented by an imaginary notion of liberty, which is emphatically produced but, at the same time, cynically consumed.

Exit from Slavery – *Vita Activa*

The last move of this attempt to analyse the distinction between ancient and modern liberty (as well as the latter’s deviations) will rely on the reflections of an important political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, whose work represents an ideal synthesis and contemporary re-elaboration of the debate initiated by Constant’s speech. In the dramatic age of the crisis of politics, which due to her Jewish origins she spent in exile in New York, Arendt turns precisely to the ancient Greek *polis* as the source of inspiration for grounding a new mode of being in the world. Her enterprise does not represent a pure archaeological rehabilitation of the experience of the ancient *politeia*, but rather a rigorous reflection on the meaning of life in common and the possibility of an authentic experience of freedom.

“Untimely Greekness”: Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the present

Her “untimely Greekness” provides critical categories for an analysis of the present aimed at denouncing the modern expropriation of the rights of citizenship and the disappearance of direct democracy, i. e. of politics in the proper sense of the word.

It is in her book *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1998) where, in continuity with her reflection on the causes and the ascendancy of the totalitarian regimes, Arendt engages the deep transformation of public life in the West-

ern society. Starting with the decline of *polis*, in fact, Arendt notes how “action” has been replaced by “labour” and “work”.

She divides *vita activa* into three fundamental forms: labour (*animal laborans*), work (*homo faber*), and action (*zoon politikón*). The first dimension refers to the realm of biological necessity, of life itself in its pursuits of self-preservation, which is maintained through labouring activities (the ancient slaves). Labour does not result in the fabrication of enduring objects, but is energy that is consumed for the fundamental needs of nutrition and reproduction, taking charge of the conservation of the domestic community. The second dimension corresponds to the non-natural activities of human existence, namely to that ensemble of human activities that are not absorbed in the life cycle, but are rather directed towards the production of an “artificial world” of durable objects, which transform the given environment and foster technological progress. It is the world of *homo faber*, who constructs factories and produces technologies, thereby enticing a deep modification of his *habitat* in order to render it more suitable to the development of work and his being in the world.

Three fundamental forms: labour (*animal laborans*), work (*homo faber*), and action (*zoon politikón*)

The analysis of this second human model clearly grasps the actual condition of modern and post-modern subjectivity. One can recognize Nietzsche’s last man, who supports nihilism by working. Indeed, the self-identical and sovereign man is close to becoming a mass reality: there is nothing above him that can tell him who he must be, since he presents himself as the unique master of himself, wearing himself out in an exhausting work activity. Nevertheless, the subject of late capitalist society is not fatally destined to be alienated, as if this chronic tiredness were the last effect of the technico-financial global evolution of species. If the *homo faber* and *homo laborans* are subjected to conditions of necessity, constriction and even affliction, Arendt considers a third sphere of life, which corresponds to its properly human dimension, i. e. a dimension that is not subservient to things and the exigencies of consumption, but that is rather projected into the world of freedom and the relationship with the other within the space of the common. Indeed, there is a primacy of action, whose value was once evident to the Greeks and is deeply disregarded by the (post-)moderns, which must be protected.

“What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to polis life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a prepolitical phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity – for instance, by ruling over slaves – and to become free. Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence toward others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world. This freedom is the essential condition of what the Greeks called felicity, eudaimonia, which was an objective status depending first of all upon wealth and health. To be poor or to be in ill health meant to be subject to physical necessity, and to be a slave meant to be subject, in addition, to man-made violence. This twofold and doubled ‘unhappiness’ of slavery is quite independent of the actual subjective well-being of the slave” (Arendt 1998, 31).

According to Arendt, the Greeks’ extraordinary awareness of the superiority of active life, of the political space as the essential condition for the exercise of their freedom subtracted from the realm of natural necessity, loses much of its original force already with Plato and Aristotle, but especially in the medieval and modern epoch. The result is a shift towards “contemplative life”, which denies the value of political action and the great interhuman discourses. It is the industrial age, then, that marks the definitive disappearance of action in favour of a productivistic, utilitarian, and indistinct kind of labour focusing exclusively on things. With resignation and dark pessimism, Arendt thinks that in her epoch, action has been replaced by labour and that this constitutes an authentic attack against democracy. In her view, political action has become “impossible”, because all subjects’ efforts are aimed at surviving. The crisis of politics turns common life into a “labouring society”, which transforms people into “jobholders”,

“as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, ‘tranquilized’, functional type of behaviour” (Arendt 1998, 322).

By emphasising the primacy of action, Arendt does not mean to diminish other human activities or faculties, nor to philosophically ground this pre-eminence, but rather she aims to fully recognize its role, its extraordinary capacity to represent human identity. Action, especially in the special mo-

dality of political action, is conceived of as the practice through which a person gives meaning to their life, brings something new into existence, and separates themselves from their biological dimension by affirming their singularity. Nobody can refrain from acting without losing their humanity. What truly matters for Arendt is the actual experience of action, and, therefore, of freedom. “Men are free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same” (Arendt 1961, 153).

“Men are free as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.”

That is the reason why Arendt thinks that only politics is able to bring to light the “gift of freedom”. According to this perspective, Arendt retrieves the peculiar experience of the *polis*, emphasising the dimension of dialogue. For Arendt, dialogue – and more generally speech – is the exemplary form of action, not so much for the content that it conveys as for its capacity to express with the greatest clarity the quality of action as the way to resist and re-articulate what happens, as the faculty to intervene in reality. Action and speech enable the delineation of a space of belonging, of mutual bond, and vital exchange, which can result in “the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (Arendt 1998, 244). What takes shape with word and deed is the essential feature that distinguishes us as human beings.

“Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the vita activa. Men can very well live without labouring, they can force others to labour for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it; the life of an exploiter or slaveholder and the life of a parasite may be unjust, but they certainly are human. A life without speech and without action, on the other hand – and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word – is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. With word

and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labour, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative” (Arendt 1998, 176–177).

“A life without speech and without action is literally dead to the world.”

The emphasis placed on the category of “word” is the unmistakable trait of Arendt’s “untimely Greekness”, which understands speech not as a form of language aiming at communicating or providing information (as it is the case with its modern usage), but rather as a dialogical game, in which the identity of the subject reveals itself, more precisely as the possibility for human beings to articulate the meaning of their actions as well as to give voice to their opinions about common issues within a shared space. *Plurality* and *human togetherness* mark political action within the public space, which, for Arendt, is the only true human space. From her viewpoint, the modern emphasis on privacy is just an illusion, an ill-advised threat against the social condition of man. “Private life” denies fundamental aspects of human beings’ existence, depriving them of an authentically human life and of the reality granted by being recognized, seen, and felt by others, in the crucial reciprocity that makes each human an interrelated being. Being-with-others means belonging to a common world, through which it is possible to establish mutual relationships and, at the same time, keep an appropriate distance from the other.

“Private life” denies fundamental aspects of human beings’ existence, depriving them of the reality granted by being recognized, seen, and felt by others.

Furthermore, Arendt underlines that for the Greeks [*archein*] and for the Romans [*agere*], acting amounts to taking initiatives, setting something in motion, making something happen in the world. In this sense, freedom corresponds to the capacity to begin, to do the unexpected, with which all human beings are gifted by virtue of being born. Action as the realization of freedom is therefore rooted in natality, in the fact that each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty in the world. This is

the reason why an authentically free action – which is tantamount to say a deeply political action – is an action that is capable of starting something new, of generating a new beginning, of interrupting the spontaneously degenerative course of human and natural events by deviating trajectories that are bound towards a deadly automatism. What characterizes word and deed is the power of interruption and “inauguration”, which is able to open up new horizons of meaning, break the nihilistic cycle of violence and injustice, and revive what has gone lost.

“If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life, which in its turn, as we saw, interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process. The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. [...] Action is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man, as Jesus of Nazareth, whose insights into this faculty can be compared in their originality and unprecedentedness with Socrates’ insights into the possibilities of thought, must have known very well when he likened the power to forgive to the more general power of performing miracles, putting both on the same level and within the reach of man” (Arendt 1998, 246–247).

“Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”

The miraculous feature capable of short-circuiting the predictability of existence and making something unexpected happen lives first and foremost in the biblical taste of an act, which is typical of the free human: forgiveness. If we could not forgive and be forgiven, freeing ourselves and the others from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity of action would remain confined within a single deed. By being forgiven, we are released from the consequences of what we have done, whereby we are given the possibility of a new beginning, as if we were reborn in a new existence, in the fundamental human condition of “plurality” and freedom. The moral code resulting from the faculty of forgiveness is not constructed upon a set of relationships each one maintains with oneself but

rather is grounded in relational experiences entailing the presence of the other. According to this very same line of argument, Hannah Arendt interprets Jesus of Nazareth's power to do miracles, which he identifies as acts of forgiving. Such a deed interrupts the necessary chain of things, suspends natural legality, "derails" the order that everyone expects and corresponds to a true act of freedom. Christian and Ancient Greek traditions are invoked by a secular contemporary philosopher to rescue the self-centred modern experience of freedom from its present destructive features.

Conclusions

Within the "untimely Greekness" of Arendt's philosophy the negative liberty of the moderns and the positive liberty of the ancients seem to find a fruitful point of intersection, which is able to interrupt the natural fall of human experiences towards insignificance and evanescence. Action is interpreted as the gift of humans to begin something new and as the possibility to redeem the experience of freedom as the very essence of politics. In her perspective, the dimension of *vita activa* as re-enactment of the miracle of the birth has the power to interrupt both the authoritarian organicism of the ancient *communitas* and the paradigm of immunization of the modern individualistic freedom to reconcile the essential *equality* and *distinction* that define human beings in the public sphere. Looking for this form of plurality is the task of a politics concerned with the question of liberty and democracy, in the resolute conviction that one cannot sacrifice one for the other.

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